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POLITICS &amp; PEOPLE

By AL HUNT



## State of the Union Speech: A Short Term Game

I used to follow State of the Union speeches, as a real journalist, with a prepared text, looking for small changes or nuances. Tuesday night an equally good guide was the latest Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll.

While predictably, the virtually certain war dominated headlines, the well-received speech was full of compassionate rhetoric, an economic plan billed as boosting the average American, immeasurably increased homeland security and a pledge to lead the world against international thugs. And no sacrifice was asked of anyone other than those in uniform.

This is a White House that insists, unlike its predecessor, that it pays little attention to public opinion. In reality, Mr. Bush is a poll- and politics-driven president with a seemingly shrewd approach: Keep the base content with broad policies and try to pick up pieces selectively: West Virginia with steel protection, Hispanics with visible judicial appointments.

Above all, frame the debate on your terms. Thus, White House master strategist Karl Rove says, with a perfectly straight face, that George Bush is really a populist. His boss matched thatchutzpah Tuesday evening in proclaiming he "will not pass along our problems to . . . other generations" -- like the \$2 trillion of debt he would leave our kids and grandkids.

The president did sound like Mr. Rove's populist with the promise of tax relief "for everyone who pays income taxes" -- a sizeable average tax reduction focused on lower-middle class Americans, small businesses and hard-pressed seniors.



Mr. Bush's tax-cut populism, reflecting public worries and polls about fairness, is reminiscent of the late Morris K. Udall's description of an earlier scheme under which, he noted, "the rich and the poor will get the same amount of ice . . . however, the poor get all of theirs in winter."

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### ABOUT AL HUNT

Albert R. Hunt is executive Washington editor for The Wall Street Journal. His responsibilities include helping to set direction and priorities for the Journal's Washington news coverage, writing the weekly editorial page column, "Politics & People," and directing the paper's political polls. He has worked for the Journal since 1965 in New York, Boston and Washington.

Mr. Hunt was a panelist on Public Broadcasting Service's "Washington Week in Review" for seven years and served as a political analyst on the "CBS Morning News" in 1984. He has been a member of Cable News Network's "The Capital Gang" since its inception in 1988, and he is one of the hosts of the CNN interview show "Evans, Novak, Hunt & Shields." He is also a periodic panelist on the National Broadcasting Co.'s "Meet the Press."

Born in Charlottesville, Va., Mr. Hunt graduated from Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. with a bachelor's degree in political science. He and his wife, CNN anchor Judy Woodruff, have three children and live in Washington.

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The president is right; 92 million Americans would get an average tax cut of almost \$1,100; half of taxpayers, however, get less than \$100 dollars, while people making over \$1 million average a \$90,200 tax cut; that does average almost \$1100 apiece, just the way baseball's Aaron brothers hit an average of 384 home runs -- Henry hit 755 and Tommie hit 13.

Then there's the touching portrait of eliminating taxes on dividends -- over half the cost of the president's economic package -- to help the poor, struggling elderly. It's true that ten million senior citizens would get this tax cut. What the president conveniently ignores is that the elderly with incomes below \$50,000 -- two-thirds of all those 65-years or older -- only get 4% of those dividend tax cut benefits, while the rich geezers -- with incomes exceeding \$200,000 -- would get almost half the benefits going to seniors. Populism?

The emphasis on getting the economy moving squares with the WSJ/NBC News poll findings that job stimulation is Americans' top priority; it just doesn't square with the president's proposals. "If you asked economists to come up with ten things to stimulate the economy," ventures Brookings Institution economist William Gale, "none would have come up with that."

The most devastating critique this week of the Bush plan was not from any lefty, however, but from conservative writer Christopher Caldwell, previewing the State of the Union speech in a delicious dialogue on Slate.com with Christopher Buckley and Walter Shapiro. "I'd be less put off by the supply-side bias of these cuts if the president hadn't so consistently urged a demand-side remedy to the problems of running a war economy," he wrote. "The rich get money; the middle class gets patriotic exhortations to spend." Mr. Caldwell warns that when asking the public for "wartime risks . . . it's imprudent to increase the percentage of poor and middle-class people who perceive themselves as being taken for a ride."

On Iraq, the president was passionate, offering his most cogent and compelling case so far; he stressed going back to the United Nations on Saddam's sins -- though pointedly not saying he will seek another resolution, which he almost certainly will not -- and of leading a "coalition to disarm him."

That reflects the WSJ/NBC poll of a hawkish but patient and multilaterally oriented public, which wants to see the evidence that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction and still considers al Qaeda and terrorism the much larger threat.

The president's most persuasive al Qaeda connection is prospective: a contained Saddam, clearly possessing chemical and biological weapons, might more eagerly supply terrorists with lethal weapons to be used against American interests. But the president's efforts to link Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein now only undercut his credibility; almost every intelligence agency agrees with Iraqi expert and invasion advocate Ken Pollack that any current connection is "tenuous and inconsequential."

Public reservations about multilateral backing will vanish once American men and women go into harm's way. But these concerns are harbingers of huge political problems if the post-Saddam period is as messy as many experts fear.

Other issues touched by the president also were shaped by public opinion. He was especially disingenuous on health care, championing patients and doctors in calling for affordable care and prescription drugs benefits for seniors. He even took a passing shot at HMOs, which his administration has sided with repeatedly over the interests of doctors and patients. There was no

mention of his real goal to make Medicare work more like the private insurance market; the public overwhelmingly opposes that notion.

But prosperity and war/terrorism dominated the address and will dominate the public's response. Mr. Bush will get a bump in the polls and a huge jump if American troops go to war. But the import of this speech and the immediate reaction was exaggerated enormously. What matters, far more than any political sales pitch, is whether a year from now the economy is humming and democracy is budding in the Mideast, or whether the insecurities of the economy and terrorism have been exacerbated.

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